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Response to Kawash

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Response

Ellis Dye

*Denn eben wo Begriffe fehlen,
Da stellt ein Wort zur rechten Zeit sich ein.*

Just when a concept...is lacking
A word shows up in the nick of time.

—Goethe, *Faust*

It is no doubt unfair to criticize an essay according to other criteria than its declared purpose. Professor Kawash does not advertise her remarks as a treatise on ethnicity, but only as a call to action—a “wake-up” call. Her argument is like the argument by Mary Catherine Bateson in the book discussed by all new Macalester students during orientation week last fall.¹ If we don’t want killings on the playground, a smarter approach than hiring more armed guards and installing metal detectors in the schoolyard would be to create job opportunities and do something for social justice. We would be fools not to heed the advice of both of these wise women, but neither one helps us understand the phenomena under examination—in this case, the uses and abuses of ethnicity.

I. A Quick Review

Professor Kawash starts out in a section entitled “Fictive Ethnicities,” a term coined by Etienne Balibar,² by recommending that we side-step the issue of defining identity. She doubts that we can answer this question because we have not succeeded in answering it so far. Ethnicity is complex. “There is no essential, universal determinant underlying the idea of ethnic identity as a fundamental and unvarying aspect of human history.”³ But although “ethnicity is fictive or invented,”⁴ it is nevertheless powerful and we must take it into account in our efforts to understand ourselves or to arrive at a prudent political course of action. She is less interested in “determining what ethnic iden-

tity is or ought to be than [in] understanding the way the idea of ethnicity operates culturally and politically to provide a framework for interpretation and action.”⁵

The swiftness with which Professor Kawash gives up trying to understand ethnicity is bewildering, and there is a discontinuity between her apparent assumption that we need no further enlightenment and that we *are* in need of a wake-up call. Only if we know more about the nature, origin, and fortunes of the concept of ethnicity and the properties conventionally assigned to particular ethnicities will we be alert to its abuses—and, in that case, perhaps sufficiently alert to critique by ourselves those abuses that Professor Kawash has taken the trouble to display. Professor Kawash announces that it is not her purpose to determine “what ethnicity is or ought to be,” but unless she can tell us something about this, her stated purpose of moving us to action cannot succeed. Saying “trust me” is not the way to get a bunch of skeptical academics into motion—either as political activists themselves or as ambassadors to activists they may know or have access to.

II. Ethnicity and Race

It might have been useful for Professor Kawash to compare the question of ethnicity with the question of race. To be sure, *race* is a word that few of us can risk using except when abhorring racism. Nevertheless, “[I]n a widely noticed racial identity case in Louisiana [*Jane Doe v. State of Louisiana*],... the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals,”⁶ which explicitly rejected “biological determination... [of racial identity] as ‘scientifically unsupportable,’... [reminded] the appellants that we can’t afford to give up the idea of race, that the accumulation of ‘racial data’ is ‘essential’ for ‘planning and monitoring public health programs, affirmative action and other anti-discrimination measures.’”⁸

There are big differences between race and ethnicity. For one thing, although ethnicity is much the broader concept, there are many more ethnicities than races. For another, ethnicity in its modern sense is young, dating, I gather from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, no farther back than a 1953 article by David Riesman in *The American Scholar*.⁹ And when one considers the trouble it has caused in so short a time, the best course of action might be

to give up using the word altogether. Nevertheless, there are two interesting similarities between any group's preoccupation with race, on the one hand, and ethnicity, on the other, as a more fashionable ground of identity.

First, the use of either term may betray a political interest or position of one kind or another. The best bad examples of what I mean by using the term *race* in *either* a hostile or a self-assertive way, of course, are provided by Nazi propaganda reviling Jews and celebrating "Aryanism." Not so mysteriously, the term *ethnicity* is seldom used in a defamatory or otherwise pejorative way, although, of course, it could be and eventually will be if those who use it in a self-serving way become too insistent. In this, as in other things, there is a point of diminishing returns and a rebound effect. What I mean by self-assertive use of "ethnicity" occurs in what Bateson calls "identity multiculturalism" in contrast to what she calls "adaptive multiculturalism." We have a case of "identity multiculturalism" when any group demands that its peculiar identity (or ethnicity) be acknowledged and honored. "Adaptive multiculturalism" is when we ecumenically recognize the presence of many cultures in our society or in the world, graciously accept each of them, and gladly make whatever adjustments in our world view, our conduct, or our circumstances may be required to enable all of us to interact in a peaceful and mutually benevolent way. It may be that "identity multiculturalism" is a precondition of "adaptive multiculturalism," inasmuch as oppressed, abused, or exploited ethnic groups are unlikely to develop the generosity toward other, more powerful groups that "adaptive multiculturalism" implies and presupposes.

A second similarity between the terms *race* and *ethnicity* is that the respective phenomena designated by these terms, as Professor Kawash correctly points out in the case of ethnicity, are both culturally constructed, not naturally given. Not only ethnicity — race too is culturally *constructed*. And although the concept of ethnicity embodies ideas about culture whereas race is supposed to be a purely biological term, both terms bear a heavy ethical and cultural load.

Surely Professor Kawash is right in rejecting essentialist views of ethnicity. Essentialists are beating a slow retreat on every front in intellectual discourse these days. Read, for exam-

ple, the article titled "Two Kinds of Antiessentialism and Their Consequences" by Charles Spinoza and Hubert L. Dreyfus.¹⁰ These authors try to justify "stable types and distinctions that may sensibly be used without indeterminacy or undecidability in most everyday contexts" without going over to the essentialist position. Their solution postulates "weakly incommensurate worlds" and the idea that one "can occupy more than one identity at a time,"¹¹ i.e., there is no contradiction in my saying that I am a White American lesbian. Professor Kawash is right in asserting that "every imagined [ethnic] purity turns out to be already contaminated and hybrid," every ethnicity somehow "invented" and then "reinvented."¹² But she has nothing to say about how or why it gets invented or why the concept of ethnicity has experienced such phenomenal growth in popularity. By contrast, Walter Benn Michaels critiques the permutations that concepts of racial identity have undergone. He concludes that "cultural identity is actually a form of racial identity"¹³ but that racial identity in the United States is determined neither by the "one-drop" rule relied on by such a racist text as Robert Lee Durham's *The Call of the South* (1908) or by the "no-drop rule," according to which race is constructed without reference to one's descent but according to culturally determined *perceptions* of the "one-drop rule." We belong to one race or another not according to a taxonomy of cranial configurations or similarities of DNA but to whichever race our parents say we belong to according to their perception of their own racial ancestry. If my parents say I am Black, then I am Black; if they say I'm White, then I'm White; but whichever they say will depend on their suppositions about what sort of blood is flowing in their veins and consequently in mine.

Surely somebody can tell us something equally interesting about the concept of ethnicity, e.g., where it came from and what the nature of the dialectic is between ethnicity as a concept and particular, loudly proclaimed ethnicities. How does a particular ethnicity become discernible and popular? When somebody's ethnicity is slighted or abused, as in an ethnic slur, what is it that is slighted or abused? As the effect of which forces and counterforces does ethnicity work its way into political discourse and the design of curricula in colleges and universities? What self-interest or self-doubt causes us to recognize particular

ethnicities and to accept the concept of ethnicity as such? Or, if this is not a political problem, not a matter of self-interest or self-doubt, but a conceptual problem pure and simple—an inherited or acculturated world-view, perhaps, that makes us think we admire the Emperor's new clothes when in fact he is naked—how might we deconstruct or trace backward the paths of our inherited or acculturated frames of reference in a way that will permit the construction of a better map or microscope? Why do we so easily suspend our disbelief? Is eclecticism permissible in the identification of ethnicity; i.e., can I say that I am of “mixed” ethnicity, and if not, why not? (If I remember right, in the Philippines you can but in the Dutch Indies you cannot.)¹⁴ And why does Professor Kawash, who would jar us awake, see no need to build conceptual defenses against future deceptions, such as are purveyed in the movie *Independence Day*, which urges us to ignore ethnicity when our common survival is at stake but, at the same time, highlights the ethnicities we are told to ignore and tries to achieve a good political balance among them?

III. Global Americas

Professor Kawash seems to consider the idea of a “global community” as “an expanded version of America”¹⁵ in connection with the 1996 Summer Olympic Games and the bombing in Atlanta's Centennial Park. She sees the Olympics as a “marketing event” that “interlac[es] global vision and corporate image.”¹⁶ In particular, she displays the implications of a number of advertisements. The UPS commercials, for example, “suggest that despite our apparent differences, we are in fact one big family, joined together under the benevolent guidance of UPS.”¹⁷ “While the Olympics are in Atlanta, . . . the global family that is established is everywhere and nowhere”¹⁸—a utopia (for “nowhere” is what utopia means). “NBC's coverage of the Games played up similar themes by treating the athletes as ethnically neutral in the competition, while on the other hand emphasizing the particularities of their home countries in the individual athlete profiles.”¹⁹ She finds in this procedure the “perhaps unintended side effect” of treating “ethnicity as something the athletes left behind in order to compete in the Games,”²⁰ but she neither says *what* was left behind—linguistic

difference, for example—nor how she knows that this side effect was “unintended” by NBC. It is indeed an interesting paradox that, on the one hand, each of us demands respect for our particular ethnicity while tolerating, on the other hand, the sports broadcasters’ demeaning mispronunciations of the names of all non-Anglican participants in the games. (One of Lyndon Johnson’s tricks for cutting his political adversaries down to size was to mispronounce their names.) Nor do we try to learn the language that our ancestors spoke or the beliefs they held dear. American contempt for anything foreign is pervasive—evinced, for example, in the fact that American airline pilots are never taught the correct pronunciation of the mountains, rivers, or cities they routinely fly over in foreign countries and point out to the passengers. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard airline captains mispronounce the name Rüdesheim—a city on the Rhine—as “Rooda-shime.” If these pilots were ever told that the syllable break is between the *s* and the *h* instead of the *e* and the *s*, they might realize that this town is somebody’s home—since “heim” is a cognate of “home.” Andy Rooney reported on September 29, 1996, that network news broadcasts twenty years ago contained almost half foreign news and that CBS used to have a bureau in Warsaw, Poland.²¹ But I stray from my point, which is that Professor Kawash should not only tell us that the ethnicity of the participants in the Games has been left behind, but that this left-behind ethnicity—whether an essence or some construction, however artificial—is nevertheless identifiable.

Professor Kawash says that “[t]he history of conquest and exploitation that underpins the current relations between First and Third worlds, between global producers and global consumers, between the providers of raw materials and those who enjoy the final products, is entirely effaced” in the presentation of the Games.²² The effect is to provide “an imaginary resolution to the contradiction between the dangerous but inevitable persistence of ethnic identity and the narrative of modernity as universalization . . . by rewriting difference as ethnicity, reducing such difference to pleasurable but harmless spectacle, and further neutralizing it by banishing it to a temporally and spatially distant elsewhere.”²³ The Dutch wear wooden shoes and raise tulips. Arabs ride camels who crowd them out of the tent when

day is done. This is not so much the “frisson of the faraway”²⁴ as the soporiferousness of the familiar. But to get behind such stereotypes, we need answers to the questions that Professor Kawash finds it unnecessary to answer. What is ethnic identity? What do universalizing narratives have to do with modernity? What other differences get mixed up and effaced when economic difference is rewritten as ethnic difference? Is my ethnicity, like my value system or my aesthetic tastes, part of the superstructure erected on the foundation of economics? Is it an arbitrary mark on an undivided curve? Or, to draw a far-fetched analogy between ethnic identity and a fertilized egg no bigger than a period on this paper, at what point and under what circumstances does it become worthwhile or mandatory either to give it a name or to face up to its fictionality?

Professor Kawash’s discussion of the tag line “Just wait till we get our Hanes on you,” beyond identifying “some” as a pejorative (since “some” misrepresent superficial dissimilarities as deep difference) and beyond pointing out that this brand of T-shirt, underwear, and casual wear tries to be ecumenical — look how many different kinds of people wear Hanes! — tells us almost nothing. Granted, Hanes affirms difference even as it denies it, as we could learn from Hegel if he weren’t a foreign, “continental” philosopher whom it is fashionable to dismiss out of hand. If T-shirts “[render] all bodies interchangeable” to Professor Kawash,²⁵ then her visual experience is different from mine — a difference which, if culturally determined (inasmuch as gender differences, too, are cultural), is not bad evidence of the effect of culture on perception. I agree with her that the suggestion of violence in the tag line “Just wait till we get our Hanes you” is not entirely innocent, but it cannot be both deliberately, suggestively threatening and an *unintended* self-revelation of predatory capitalism, unstably suppressed by the upbeat tone of the ad.²⁶

Perhaps Professor Kawash does not dig deeper because she is unsure of the character and potential needs and uses of her audience. Who is it that needs to be reminded that we should stop demonizing other earthlings — a point made already in 1779 by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his play *Nathan the Wise*, which ends with a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian knight, and the Christian girl adopted and raised as a Deist by the wise Jew

Nathan, all revealed to be members of the same family?²⁷ And by Christian Wolff, Lessing's older contemporary, who in 1721 wrote an essay on the superior moral philosophy of the Chinese.²⁸ The issues have not changed very much since the eighteenth century, but I am not sure exactly who Professor Kawash thinks needs to hear the message again. Her critique of *Independence Day* seems to take for granted that those of us gathered here today already understand the rhetoric of "otherness" and the familiar division between "us" and "them," and that we acknowledge — although we might have noticed this without her aid and without neglecting the movie's special effects — that the line between good ethnics and bad aliens in this film is the same as the line drawn between inhabitants of this globe and those ugly, squishy creatures who come from farther out. No great novelty that. Nor could I discern that those who come from farther out are demonized in this film in precisely the same terms regularly employed to demonize cultural adversaries closer at hand, i.e., people of alien ethnicity. To find something ethnic in a technically precocious dinosaur embryo is to say about the word *ethnic*, as Arthur Lovejoy said about the word *Romanticism*, that it has "ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign."²⁹ Professor Kawash rightly scorns the point that an alien threat unifies the insider group — with its exclusive subjectivity and self-conferred centrality — whatever subgroups may still be allowed to pay a harmless, undivisive homage to the statue of the unknown Norwegian.

IV. No Concept Behind the Word?

Most of us here today probably agree that the 1996 presidential election should not turn on the issue of illegal aliens and border control. We probably also agree that the children of illegal aliens should not be denied schooling. Nor are all of us deceived when political-economic strife is rewritten as *ethnic* conflict, although we do need more criticism of such sleights of hand by those in whose interest they are performed. But if she would arouse indignation when ethnic identity is used and abused, Professor Kawash needs to help us understand what it is — indeed, whether the word *ethnicity* stands for anything at all. As

Mephistopheles says to the student in Goethe's *Faust*, a work profoundly suspicious of the verbalism of the Enlightenment:

MEPHISTO: Rely on words, for heaven's sake
for words unlock the fastened gate
to the temple halls of certainty.

STUDENT: Yet with the word there must some concept rhyme.

MEPHISTO: Well, don't insist on too much backing
Just when a concept, sad to say, is lacking
A word shows up in the nick of time.³⁰

I am not sure whether Professor Kawash under- or *overestimates* us—whether she takes our understanding of the issues and our influence for granted—so that she only needed to issue a rally cry, or whether she is worried that we may be guilty of swallowing American advertising and Hollywood's peddling of a primitive patriotism hook, line, and sinker. Perhaps she doubts that we are as politically enlightened but philosophically naïve as I am now claiming and is simply hopefully casting her bread upon the waters. But I think that more analysis would have been gratefully received. At least the sedentary, contemplative types among us, such as yours truly, will act with more conviction when we better understand the whys and wherefores. As Christian Wolff also said, "The recognition of the good is a motivation of the will."³¹

Notes

1. Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).
2. Samira Kawash, "Good Ethnicity, Bad Aliens: Imagining the Global Village" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 176.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 177.
6. Walter Benn Michaels, "The No-Drop Rule" in *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 764.
7. Ibid., 767.
8. Ibid., 768.
9. See entry on *ethnicity* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. V (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 424. This entry refers to David Riesman's

- essay, "Some Observations on Intellectual Freedom" in *The American Scholar* 23, 1 (Winter 1953–54): 15.
10. Charles Spinoza and Hubert Dreyfus, "Two Kinds of Antiessentialism and Their Consequences" in *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (Summer 1996): 735–63.
11. *Ibid.*, 737.
12. Kawash, "Good Ethnics, Bad Aliens," 176.
13. Michaels, "The No-Drop Rule," 758.
14. Benedict Anderson, "The Grammars of Modern Identity" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 12–14.
15. Kawash, "Good Ethnics, Bad Aliens," 189.
16. *Ibid.*, 182.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 183.
19. *Ibid.*, 184.
20. *Ibid.*
21. As reported by Andy Rooney on "Sixty Minutes" (CBS), 29 September 1996.
22. Kawash, "Good Ethnics, Bad Aliens," 184.
23. *Ibid.*, 185.
24. *Ibid.*, 183.
25. *Ibid.*, 187.
26. *Ibid.*, 188.
27. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* (1779).
28. Christian Wolff, "Rede von der Sittenlehre der Sineser aus dem Jahre, 1721," rpt. *Deutsche Literatur in Entwicklungsreihen, Reihe Aufklärung*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), 174–95.
29. "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms" in *PMLA* 39 (1924): 229 – 53; reprinted in Arthur Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1948), 232.
30. Goethe, *Faust*, lines 1990–96.
31. Christian Wolff, "Vernünfftige Gedanken von der Menschen Tun und Lassen aus dem Jahre 1720," rpt. *Deutsche Literatur in Entwicklungsreihen, Reihe Aufklärung*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), 143.